

# Heritage as an International Strategy: Is it Possible Under a Decentralised System?

**Pablo Picó Salort**

IE University, Madrid, Spain

Dual Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and International Relations

E-mail: ppico.ieu2021@student.ie.edu

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## Abstract

Heritage preservation and promotion has been in the public discourse for the last fifty years, but only recently has it started to be considered as something that can be considered inside an international strategy plan instead of just at an internal state level. This paper provides an overview of the heritage management approach in the countries of Spain and Germany in order to assess whether they utilise it in the formulation of a strategy to promote the country abroad. It delves into a definition of patrimony and how it can be used within an international strategy before getting into the analysis of both countries and their different approaches to the internationalisation of heritage, including cultural tourism and protection plans. Controversial case studies such as the Doñana wetlands are considered in analysing how the models currently function. This paper critically assesses the efficiency of the decentralised models, as well as the different contexts in both countries. At the end, some recommendations are made on what can be learnt through the approach of both countries and which other areas would provide an interesting research.

Keywords: Heritage, Heritage Internationalisation, Patrimony, International Strategy, Culture, UNESCO, Cultural Tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

Before starting this paper, we must ask ourselves an inevitable question: what is heritage? The widely recognised definition from UNESCO focuses on the temporality of it, highlighting the past, present and future dimensions of such heritage<sup>1</sup>, but it might perhaps fall short of certain aspects. Patrimony has an inherent value to it implied in it, that can manifest in a

variety of forms, and that is based on subjective interpretation and valorisation of it. It is present in a variety of forms: material or immaterial, cultural and natural, and encompasses from architecture and monuments to traditions and ways of doing.

We are often aware of how heritage can be a fundamental tool in implementing domestic policies (for example, as a symbol of national identity), but it also has an external policy application that is frequently overlooked. For instance, in its recent strategies, the

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<sup>1</sup>"Our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we will pass on to future generations" (UNESCO, [World Heritage](#), 2024)

European Union has placed an important significance in culture, seeing it as "*an engine for economical and social development*" as well as "*crucial in building long-term relationships with countries across the whole world*". Inside this cultural strategy, an important asset for the European states is heritage given its variety and quantity.

There is also an active public opinion on the matter: according to the Eurobarometer survey on Cultural Heritage, in 2017 more than 80% of respondents believe cultural heritage is important at a European level, with the numbers for the national importance reaching 90%<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, there is no discussion open on the potentiality of said heritage, as inside the own countries it is put into value and appreciated (something that in some legislations is a required condition in order to declare a protected site<sup>3</sup>).

However, how can we turn these heritage assets into elements of a structured foreign strategy? There are a variety of ways in which this can happen. Perhaps the most evident one is the economical value of the heritage, namely in the form of tourism. According to the World Tourism organisation, four out of every ten tourists choose their destinations based on the destination's cultural offering<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, doctor Elisa Panzera has proven that the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites has a direct impact on tourism

flow to those places, despite this correlation not happening in the case of more abundant material heritage without a proper communication strategy<sup>5</sup>. Tourism is thus an essential source of economic growth within these countries, supposing over 9% at a European Level in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece<sup>6</sup>, countries which have a greater number of UNESCO World Heritage sites<sup>7</sup>, and therefore solidifying their position in the global stage. Furthermore, doctor Panzera's research also highlights the internationalisation of heritage as a strategy to promote the country abroad<sup>8</sup>.

In spite of this, there is much more to heritage than just its economical dimension. It can also be a vehicle for development and social cohesion, as indicated by a 2015 report of the European Commission, by increasing social participation and insertion<sup>9</sup>. From the environmental perspective, it can serve as a catalyst for improvement of conditions, not only when natural heritage is also considered inside the forms of heritage, but also in the development of landscape protection policies when material heritage is protected inside its physical context<sup>10</sup>. And at an international scene, heritage does not only help in the configuration of a national identity, but also in projecting a solid image

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, [Special Eurobarometer 466: Cultural Heritage](#), pp. 22, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this would be the different heritage conservation laws for the German *Länder* (provinces).

<sup>4</sup> WTO. [Tourism and Culture Synergies](#), pp. 25, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Panzera et al., [European cultural heritage and tourism flows: The magnetic role of superstar World Heritage Sites](#), pp. 19, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> WTTC. [Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2023: Europe LCU](#), pp.4.. 2024.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO. [World Heritage List](#). 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Panzera et al., 2020.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission. [Getting cultural heritage to work for Europe](#), pp.9. 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ídem.

internationally. For instance, in the case of Ethiopia, heritage images were used to project a successful image of modernization and international reach and impact starting from the 60s<sup>11</sup>. This is why the study of heritage can be of much value to understanding a country's foreign strategy, and why this essay is structured around analysing whether this happens in some countries.

Having established these fundamental aspects, we will now examine the approaches to heritage management inside the European regulatory framework in Spain and Germany, in order to draw implications from how it currently is applied and in which ways it can be improved as an international strategy, in order to answer the question *"In which ways do Spanish and German heritage preservation practices differ in creating a strategy to promote the country abroad?"*.

The selection of these two countries is not coincidental. First of all, both of them are inside the European Union, which has explicitly highlighted the importance of culture and heritage politics. This leaves no room for assumptions on whether it might or not be considered inside their foreign strategy. Secondly, they both exhibit a heritage management model that highly relies on subdivisions of the State for management (Länder in Germany, Autonomies in Spain). This model can prove to be advantageous in that it helps a greater micromanagement of the assets, but could potentially be harmful in formulating a

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<sup>11</sup> Huber, Marie. [Heritage as image of the nation](#), pp. 56. 2021.

state-level unified strategy. Throughout the analysis, we will also try to assess the validity of this approach, its strong points and potential deficiencies. Finally, both countries present radically different historical contexts: whereas Spain's past is marked by the presence of many population groups such as Romans, Muslims, Greeks, Celts and others, Germany has a more cohesive presence of population and Germanic tradition throughout its history. Furthermore, we can also appreciate the impact of XXth Century conflicts in both countries' national heritage, specially in the case of Nazi and WWII Germany<sup>12</sup>. The analogy between both of the countries can shed light to interesting results, for within their similarity in formal approach there is a relevant difference in culture, size, and past of its management.

As a final note, it is noteworthy to mention that we will at all times encompass the different forms of heritage as defined by UNESCO in its different scopes: tangible or intangible, cultural and natural, though we will make distinctions between them in the case studies we will be covering.

## 2. Spain

A good indicator of Spain's rich heritage is the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites within its territory: 73<sup>13</sup>, spanning from cities to monuments, traditions, natural landscapes and three good practice projects, in

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<sup>12</sup> Zunino, Berenice. [Cultural Heritage, a Central Issue in European Wars during the Modern Period](#). 2020.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, [Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices](#), 2024.

a very diverse and complete list. While not an absolute indicator, the high quantity hints at a rich diversity of heritage preserved within the country. Thus, it would be logical to assume that Spain does put a high importance on its heritage, and it is able to capitalise on it for State benefit. We shall now analyse if this assumption holds true through delving into the functioning of the management system.

From a historical perspective, Spain has used its heritage as a way of showcasing the country to the world since the 1960s. Under the motto "Spain is different", the regime of dictator Francisco Franco was able to create an international image from the country through tourism, following the opening and modernisation of the country. The promotional posters showed what would become characteristic of Spanish tourism ("sun and beach" tourism) but also featured images of historical monuments such as Alhambra and the Ávila walls, as well as traditional clothing and celebrations. In this, we could see a hint of how the Spanish government under the Minister of Information and Tourism (Manuel Fraga) was trying to use heritage as a way of presenting Spain as an exotical destination, also improving its image after years of isolation and despite still being a dictatorship with limited political liberties.

If we look at how the situation is nowadays, the promotion of heritage abroad is included as an important part of the Spanish foreign strategy for 2021-2024. Whereas most of the references in it are

directed towards the culture of the Spanish language and how it helps bind Spain and Latin America, the document does state that it is of interest to "reinforce the image of Spain as a country with a rich cultural, historical, artistic and gastronomical patrimony"<sup>14</sup>. We can see an attempt here of formulating an international strategy that places heritage in an important position in order to do so. However, is this applied in real life?

It seems like Spain has mainly used its heritage in order to promote its cultural diversity within its borders, a trend that has been exacerbated in the last few years<sup>15</sup>. The delegation of the heritage management on the autonomies has proven to be negative for Spain in matters of internationalisation, a sign of it being that there is currently no significant inter-regional nor national-regional efforts have been carried out to promote Spanish culture abroad<sup>16</sup>. Spain does count with some institutions tied to the government that manage patrimony, mainly in the form of Patrimonio Nacional, an organism in charge of managing the public assets originally belonging to the monarchy and that are spread through the territory, but their reach is limited and it does not truly reach an international projection.

The most important element that we see present in Spanish heritage management with an international projection dimension would be cultural tourism. Its

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<sup>14</sup> Gobierno de España. [Estrategia de Acción Exterior 2021-2024](#), pp. 85. 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Villaroya, Anna and Ateca-Amestoy, Victoria. [Spain: Country profile](#), pp. 13. Last updated 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Ídem

main problem is its clash against a more leisure-oriented type of tourism (the "sun and beach" tourism mentioned before), which still holds a predominant role despite the growth of the cultural form<sup>17</sup>. Tourism is easier to implement, as the economic incentive is shared by both regional and state-level governments, in a way that no communication is required between the actors (as we saw before, that is practically nonexistent in Spain). Furthermore, cultural tourism places a heavy weight on material heritage, as it is easier to transform into a cultural offering and manage given its concrete geographical location.

Nonetheless, as doctor Carmen Mínguez highlights, there is a differentiation between the different types of cultural destination based on the appeal of the cultural assets that they offer and the vision that the city holds for its future<sup>18</sup>, which in many cases depends on the resources they have to preserve the heritage they want to market as cultural offerings. The most successful models complement cultural experiences with others, and compete against each other for attracting visitors. Thus, we can conclude that the strategy for heritage internationalisation is more coincidental than planned, and that only places with certain conditions are able to achieve it. At the same time, and despite cities like Barcelona or Valencia projecting an international image of the country, the internal

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<sup>17</sup> Mínguez, Carmen. [The management of cultural resources in the creation of Spanish tourist destinations](#). 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Ídem

competition between cities hinders a national strategy for it. From this model, we can criticise that it is mainly based on urban organisation, but no significant cases of natural heritage used in mass tourism in Spain (except, perhaps, the Camino de Santiago) allow us to develop a better one.

Outside of the cultural tourism aspect, Spain does not seem to offer much else internationally precisely because of the lack of cooperation between actors. A controversial case study that illustrates this is that of the wetlands park of Doñana, located in the province of Huelva (Southwest of Spain) and listed inside the UNESCO World Heritage List "for the great diversity of its biotopes"<sup>19</sup> and for harboring endangered species in it. In recent years, it has made the news given the mismanagement by local authorities, which proposed legalising the currently clandestine strawberry plantations that drain the water from the protected park, thus endangering it<sup>20</sup>. As the competence is delegated on the Autonomies, the Spanish government could not intervene directly, but the Environment Minister had to intervene in order to cut a deal that safeguarded the park through economical help to the local farmers<sup>21</sup>. This deal came after an international backlash, with German consumers even promoting a boycott of Spanish strawberries<sup>22</sup> and the Government

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<sup>19</sup> UNESCO. [Doñana National Park](#). 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Gallego, José Luis. [El grave daño a la fresa de Huelva de los cultivos ilegales de Doñana](#). June 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, Sam. [Spanish minister hails deal to save Andalucía wetlands as a model for green transition](#). December 27th, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Gallego, José Luis. June 2023.

itself entering a political quarrel with the ideologically opposed regional government from the Junta de Andalucía. Despite the affair having reinforced the vision of the Spanish government internationally, it also exposes how coordination in Spain between different levels in matters of heritage is complicated, especially when different interests are at play. This greatly difficulties the use of a joint strategy, as despite the guidelines set by governments the practical reality might play out differently and even affect the country's image negatively.

In conclusion, in the case of Spain we can see how, despite the initiative of the Government for including heritage as part of the international strategy of the country, the current political situation can sometimes hinder this approach. The main way of international promotion, tourism in its cultural variant, faces the clash against the leisure oriented tourism, and also presents some controversies with respect to how it sometimes damages the heritage it is showcasing itself.

### 3. Germany

Despite being less varied in population groups present, Germany's history is comparable in richness to the Spanish one, with more than 2000 years of history and a great presence of preserved heritage in its multiple forms (natural, architectural, artistic, historical, etc.). Inside the UNESCO list, Germany currently holds 52 registered World Heritage sites<sup>23</sup>, a fact that once again

gives us a hint on the richness of the patrimony contained within the state.

German heritage management faces a paradigmatic case that comes from the nature of the German State itself. When unified in 1871, the territory of the German State comprised a large quantity of German-speaking microstates that had to some extent developed different cultures and held within a range of material heritage. Though unified politically, these territories were allowed to retain and manage their local customs and culture, a fact that later motivated the attribution of cultural and heritage management competences to the Länder (regional governments). Despite a brief parenthesis in the national unification promoted by the National-Socialist regime between 1933 and 1945, which sought to unify the country culturally within a certain cultural and ideological framework, the Länder approached was maintained in both Germanies, with the Western part having stronger regulations that were later on implemented in the East upon reunification on the 1990s. Germany follows an approach heavily influenced by the recommendations of the Council of Europe<sup>24</sup>, that has an internal vision of heritage management rather than an external perspective.

Despite the high degree of freedom in setting the priorities and applications of heritage management, the German system proves to be far more coordinated than

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<sup>23</sup> UNESCO, [Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices](#), 2024.

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<sup>24</sup> Blumenreich. [Germany: Country Cultural Profile](#). Last updated 2022.

the Spanish one. The German *Bundestag*<sup>25</sup> created in 1998 the Committee on Culture and the Media, which does not serve as a unifying body but does coordinate and revise policies by the different *Länder*<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, smaller subcommittees can deal with specific issues. Added to this, there is an "Enquete Commission" for crafting appropriate reports, that in 2003 delivered a 1200-page, 459-recommendation report on "Culture in Germany", which is still taken into consideration nowadays<sup>27</sup>. Thus, we can see how despite the autonomy there is a great cooperation within actors that facilitates a joint approach.

However, is this fact a synonym of Germany having more facilities to use heritage as an international strategy? Not necessarily. It seems like the situation is that the German system is highly efficient in guaranteeing correct preservation of heritage, as well as coordinating different actor interests in, for example, offering incentives in order to do so<sup>28</sup>. Nonetheless, this situation does not seem to be used in formulating an external strategy. Let us now analyse some of the ways in which Germany could formulate said strategy to prove how it is not being done in the present.

The aspect of cultural tourism is not as strong in Germany as we saw before in Spain. If we take a look at its most visited monuments, and without considering

the outlier of the Köln Cathedral, most of its cultural monuments barely made it past the million visitor mark in 2023<sup>29</sup>. Even within this list, few of the UNESCO heritage sites are featured. This might respond to a pragmatic approach to heritage, which understands its importance and invests in its preservation, but does not exploit it through cultural tourism. It seems like the German government is currently using heritage more for internal than external policies. In fact, several of the German UNESCO World Heritage sites are involved in projects fostering natural restoration, social participation and good management practices, such as the case of the city of Bamberg<sup>30</sup>, Regensburg<sup>31</sup> or the Zollverein site<sup>32</sup>. Being completely different cases (towns from the medieval times, modern era and industrial heritage), the three cases adopt similar approaches in regards to good practices: respect for the communities, social integration, sustainability... all of which fosters an internal growth and is not marketed to the outside nor used for crafting a national image.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is impossible to formulate an international strategy based on heritage.

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<sup>25</sup> Parliament

<sup>26</sup> Blumenreich. Last updated 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Blumenreich. Last updated 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Amar, Johari et al. [Built Heritage Management Systems: Australia and Germany Compared](#), pp. 89. June 2023.

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<sup>29</sup> Schmidt, Kerstin. [Germany's 10 most visited attractions](#). March 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Kloos, Michael and Albert, Patricia. [The Case Study of the Town of Bamberg \(Germany\) Concerning the Combination of Management Plans with Participation Strategies in Urban World Heritage Properties](#). November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Ripp, Matthias. [Regensburg's World Heritage Management Plan. Creation of a World Heritage Strategy Together With The Citizens](#). August 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Oevermann, Heike. [Good practice for industrial heritage sites: systematization, indicators, and case](#). March 2020.

Given the highly efficient coordination that exists between actors, and the benchmark that is the current and successful approach to heritage management, Germany could develop a more ambitious plan with which it could help promote the country abroad through its heritage. Perhaps this hasn't been in its best interest in the recent decades, given how the country has mainly framed its international relations in economic matters and with a heavy weight put on its economy, industry and European integration instead of differentiating the country on its own. Perhaps the experience with the exacerbation of German culture and heritage brought by the Nazi regime has left a lasting distaste for sharing it abroad, as it could be seen as a way of returning to those practices of imposing it over others.

Despite this, it is suggested that Germany takes advantage of their solid structure and good management network in order to integrate heritage in its international strategy. It doesn't necessarily have to be through a cultural tourism strategy, given how we have seen before that in a delegation systems cities are forced to compete with each other, difficulting a unified strategy. Nonetheless, given the vastness of the original German-speaking territories and the shared past of Germany with many of its surrounding nations, heritage can be used not as national promotion, but at a European level, which seems to be the main approach in German foreign policy currently.

#### **4. Recommendations and conclusions**

The case studies of Germany and Spain show us that heritage management can be used as a way of creating an international strategy for a country, but are often not sufficiently employed due to either lack of a centralising authority, or it not being considered inside the State interest. Nonetheless, its potential is latent, as shown not only by data and research, but also by successful case studies. In economies that have already become industrialised and play a relevant role inside world politics, the development of soft power through heritage strategies can prove very beneficial in achieving state interests.

As we have also seen, the system of delegating the management of heritage to regional authorities has its advantages and drawbacks. In the case of Spain, it can prove efficient in safeguarding its heritage and it does have a strong cultural tourism offer, but the absence of a centralising reporting or consultative institution makes any attempt of internationalisation futile. In the case of Germany, if it hasn't promoted its heritage sufficiently abroad it has been because of political decisions, given how their structure is highly efficient and gathers some elements of centralisation while still letting each *Land* retain control over its own heritage. However, it could be highly positive for the country to formulate a more concrete international approach. From both of these cases, lessons can be drawn so that other countries can formulate their own strategies, and

exploit their heritage while at the same time making sure that it is protected and safeguarded.

The comparative methodology used in this article would also be interesting to apply to countries with different approach systems, such as a decentralised and a centralised one. For instance, the case of France, which does have an extensive program for promoting its heritage globally, could be compared to the already analysed German system, to see in which aspects each one of them is strong and which ones it could improve. Furthermore, by doing the analogy between countries in different geographical areas and with different patrimony levels, interesting results could also come to light in the search for an effective international heritage strategy.

As a conclusion, it is worth highlighting how despite the importance that heritage takes theoretically within countries' foreign strategy, it is still a resource left untapped. While protection and preservation should always be the top priority in what refers to heritage, it is recommended that states move on from an exclusively internal approach to heritage or one based on cultural tourism, and start exploring the possibilities that these assets offer to them for their future international projection.

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